

Kathie Hewko



Open Water Swimmer of the Month

The northern Californian has been regularly swimming back and forth across the mouth of San Francisco Bay since 1976. Over the course of her 38-year journey swimming underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, Hewko has completed 89 crossings, the most prolific Golden Gate Bridge swimmer in history.

And she is intent on putting her record far, far off in the distance.

"I have my 90th crossing scheduled for October 19th and have the most crossings of anyone by at least 20," explains the Michigan native.

"I did my 50th Golden Gate swim on my 60th birthday with a goal to swim my 100th crossing on my 70th birthday in 2016."

Over the 4-decade period, her times have ranged from a current-boosted 26 minutes to a grueling 90-minute battle against the tidal flows and turbulent surface chop.

There have been many highlights on the way. "In 1976, some pool lifeguards told me there is a women's only Golden Gate Bridge swim. My first thought was that water is freezing and there are sharks. But I jumped in the bay and the water wasn't too bad. The morning of the swim I had heard that you should carbo load so I had 3 chocolate-covered donuts. There were 2-foot swells during the swim and halfway across, I started feeling sick so I put my hand up to get out. Along comes an old geezer in a wooden boat who said, "Shut up and count your strokes". Well, I guess I wasn't getting out so kept on going – the beginning of a tradition."

These swims have given her the opportunity to enjoy San Francisco like only swimmers can. "I have had harbor porpoises swimming next to me and saw a pilot whale going west under the bridge. The coolest experience I had was when I went to touch Lime Rock, the official end of the swim. Right in front of me was a harbor seal looking at me; its eyes were big, but mine were even bigger. My immediate thought was, 'How do I touch the rock? It's not official if I don't touch the rock.' I looked away to see who may have also seen the seal, but when I looked back, the seal was gone and I didn't

even feel it swimming away. Another time while swimming in Aquatic Park, I felt some movement below me and stopped. Two sea lions arched and were facing each other with my flowered cap in the middle."

Other than her consistency and commitment, what is perhaps even most impressive is her choice of swimwear. "I still have the bathing suit from my first Golden Gate Bridge swim. It is an old nylon," explains the fabulously fit real estate agent with a perpetual smile on her face, both in and out of the water. "And I plan to wear it on my 100th crossing." She wore her trusty swimsuit at the 4th annual Women's Bicentennial Golden Gate Swim, a 1.12-mile swim on October 16th 1976 from Lime Rock to Fort Point when she swam together with 51 swimmers in 59°F (15°C) water for 42 minutes. With her regime of swimming and healthful living, she still has the figure to fit in it well.

But it is not all easy. "I live with Lyme disease and two co-infections which make my swims quite challenging. But life goes on."

It most certainly does. Even when the water has dipped as low as 45°F (7°C), she still gets in and swims under the massive red bridge with its swirling eddies and tricky tides. No two swims are the same with boats, seals, and dolphins coming and going all the time, but fortunately, she has never encountered a shark or had a regret while out in the water. And the beautiful scenery - both man-made under the mighty bridge and natural along the shorelines and deep below - remains a huge draw.

Which is why she keeps going back to swim under the Golden Gate Bridge over and over and over again.

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Hewko, who has completed
89 crossings,
is the most prolific
Golden Gate Bridge
swimmer in history.

Wait a second...
How Many Times?

AND COUNTING